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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 FREETOWN 000134

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER/ESPRUILL)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/09/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR SL

SUBJECT: ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN: INFLUENCE IN STATE HOUSE

REF: FREETOWN 79

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Perry recently met with two of the President's closest advisors: Emmanuel Osho Coker, Secretary to the President, and Joseph Koroma, newly-appointed Minister of Presidential Affairs. Both are highly experienced technocrats, having served in the Foreign and Civil services, as well as stints with international and private organizations. Since Coker's appointment as Secretary in September 2008, his time has been focused primarily on development assistance and coordination. Koroma, an addition to the Cabinet following the reshuffle (reftel), considers himself the "political enforcer" whose responsibilities primarily include ensuring other ministers follow-through on their promises and Executive instructions. Both are considered influential with the Head of State, as is President Koroma's special assistant, Brian Gilpin. These three advisors have specific roles to play with regards to supporting the President's objectives, as well as our own. Joseph Koroma is emerging as the person best-situated to influence the President on significant issues. End Summary.

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THE COMPANY MAN: COKER  
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¶2. (C) Ambassador met with Emmanuel Osho Coker on April 2, who discussed his efforts to reinvigorate the donor community to tangibly support the President's priorities in agriculture and youth unemployment. Coker is determined to re-establish the donor coordination that has waned in recent years. The Ambassador informed him of various USAID and post-supported activities, including the \$13 million agricultural project being implemented by ACDI/VOCA. Coker discussed the need for value-added production, and noted his impatience with Sierra Leone's inability to produce even simple items for domestic consumption, such as toothpicks and paper clips. He agreed with Ambassador that this is the right time for Sierra Leone to take fuller advantage of AGOA benefits.

¶3. (C) Coker is a veteran of the Foreign Service (7 years in Germany), and also held leadership positions in the Development and Establishment Secretariats. He took a secondment with DFID in 2001 and headed the Governance Reform Secretariat. Coker is noted for his consistent push to improve the public sector and build capacity with the civil service, particularly at the mid- and junior levels. Though an APC member, he considers himself an apolitical technocrat in his professional life. Coker is noted amongst insiders as being a man of great integrity, who would resign if he believed that business was being conducted inappropriately or unlawfully.

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THE ENFORCER: KOROMA  
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¶4. (C) At an April 6 meeting with the new Minister for Presidential Affairs, Joseph Koroma, topics for discussion included some of the general themes from the Coker meeting; implementing activities to address the President's priorities in youth employment and agriculture, as well as increasing investment interests. The Minister also spoke at length regarding problems plaguing the health sector, including the avalanche of low-quality and fake drugs now on the market, as well as pharmaceutical procurement, management, and distribution. The Minister mentioned several high-level meetings the President has held lately regarding developing a strategic plan for agriculture, with a focus on increasing the production of cassava and rice over the next two years. He also noted the need for investment in the extractive industries and tourism.

¶5. (C) Koroma was highly responsive to the Ambassador's message that the various "big ticket" requests the GoSL continues to be interested in, including an official visit to Washington and inclusion in the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) account, cannot be considered without clear signs that the GoSL is a fully cooperative bilateral partner (Note: At the same time, we are continuing to respond to critical humanitarian needs and will seek further support from Department to do so. End note). Ambassador referred to the Status of Forces Agreement, which has been in the negotiations stage since 2006 and is only now making incremental progress towards signature, as well as an unsigned and needed agreement to enable the U.S. Coast Guard to conduct joint enforcement operations with the military's maritime wing. Ambassador also stated that planned video conferences between government officials and MCC

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representatives have been pending for several months because the GoSL has not provided a list of who should be involved. Koroma was quick to note these pending issues, and assured the Ambassador that he will provide responses on all within a week's time. He made clear that he intends to hold Ministers' feet to the fire with regards to providing timely responses (Note: Koroma is so far proving himself to be a man of his word: Embassy received a list of GoSL officials for the MCC video conferences on April 7. End note). He also stated that he serves as the primary conduit of information to the President.

¶6. (C) Koroma served 14 years in the Sierra Leonean Foreign Service, spending 12 years at the country's mission to the UN in New York. He ultimately rose to the position of Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN before leaving the Foreign Service to work for an NGO. He later worked for the African Development Bank in Abidjan for four years on environmental projects before taking up a position as the head of the UNIDO office in Sierra Leone. According to a British contact, Koroma had been approached by the President to be a member of his first Cabinet, but Koroma refused. He was allegedly unhappy with some of the initial Cabinet picks because they represented pay-back for political favors, and chose to remain with UNIDO. According to source, Koroma agreed to a Cabinet position if he could play a decision-making role in the reshuffle. He informed the Ambassador that poor performers in the Cabinet had been moved to lower-level positions as a warning sign, but that they would be fired if their failure to impress the President and others continued (Note: He was likely referring to David Carew, former Minister of Finance and now Minister of Trade and Industry, Alimamy Koroma, former Minister of Trade and Industry and now Minister of Works, and Haja Afsatu Kabba, former Minister of Energy and now Minister of Marine Resources. End note).

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THE WEATHER VANE: GILPIN  
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¶7. (C) Emboffs meet with Brian Gilpin, Special Assistant to the President, regularly to discuss pending issues,

particularly those that must be handled with great sensitivity. Gilpin is also an important contact for logistics and scheduling for the President, particularly for VIP visits. Gilpin is known for his nuanced approach when it comes to handling the President, and can be relied upon to relay information to Koroma without adding his own editorials. He is perhaps the best-placed within the President's circle to accurately predict his reactions to events and issues, as well as ascertain the optimal moment to approach Koroma on particular topics. Gilpin frequently writes the President's speeches and press statements, though he admitted that others "sneak" things through when he is even briefly away from State House (Note: The President's immediate response to the March clashes, for example, was cleared without Gilpin's knowledge or review. Gilpin expressed frustration that the President's statement lacked polish and failed to fully highlight the need for unity across party lines. End note).

¶8. (C) Gilpin spent a number of years in the UK in the private sector before returning to Sierra Leone in his current capacity. While an APC member, he is not known for partisanship. Though Gilpin is close to the President, he does not have the authority to heavily influence his decisions and it is unlikely that he puts significant pressure on Koroma to make decisions or be responsive to requests. A contact in the Office of Tony Blair who works in State House told Poloff that Gilpin's authority and influence is overestimated by the international community, noting the UK in particular has unfounded faith in Gilpin to further their agenda.

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COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) Understanding the President's advisors, their areas of influence, and their motivations are critical in Sierra Leone. Time and again, President Koroma has shown himself to be a slow decision-maker, oftentimes taking appropriate action but only after weeks, or even months, of deliberations. When Koroma does make promises, he has little time to see that they are carried out by those serving him. Post will need to make strategic use of our contacts who are closest to him, to both speed his decision-making and ensure that impediments to our bilateral agreements and needs are removed. Coker will be an excellent interlocutor on issues surrounding our foreign assistance, particularly as the GoSL seeks to implement new, stringent regulations on NGO

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activities. Gilpin continues to be an asset to post, but with recognition that he is limited in his ability to push the right buttons for action on our behalf when needed. The British High Commissioner, Ian Hughes, told Poloff that "they are pinning their hopes on Joe Koroma," and post will do so as well when it comes to addressing our highest priority issues. Despite this optimism about Joseph Koroma's potential impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of State House, one cannot forget two independent variables that could muddy the waters: President Koroma's stubborn and headstrong personality, and the possibility that Coker and Joseph Koroma could engage in a "turf war" to establish their place as the Head of State's right-hand. Coker and the previous Minister of Presidential Affairs had this type of battle, with Coker victoriously remaining at State House while Alhaji Alpha Kanu moved to the Ministry of Mineral Resources. Post will observe the relationship between Coker and Koroma in the coming months, and in the meantime will test Gilpin's hypothesis that Joseph Koroma is "the most powerful man in government." End Comment.

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